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# THE CREED OF THE REUNITED CHURCH

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A reunited Christendom is a popular vision which is rapidly growing nearer to realization with the multiplication of inter-communal organizations, co-operative agreements and federations, and a better understanding due to mutual acquaintance. That there is a strong desire for the greatest degree of union possible is evident from the wide response given to the invitation of the Anglican communion to a world-conference on matters of faith and order.

It is well for all thoughtful Christians to attempt to formulate in their minds the possibilities which may be discussed, or ought to be discussed, in such a conference, and the attitude of mind which will make possible any positive result from the conference. It is from this point of view that I have attempted to set down my personal convictions concerning the creedal basis which must underlie any organic reunion of Christendom.

As long as Christian men think, they will arrange their ideas upon religious subjects in creedal form. Peter formed a creed when he answered our Lord's question with the statement, "Thou art the Christ of God." But such personal confessions, dealing with the conviction which happens to be central in our thoughts at the moment, although no vital religion can exist without them, cannot be considered the basis for a social organization. And I shall use the

word "creed" in the sense of a statement of faith formed for the use of a body of believers as a common expression of their common faith. The creed thus becomes the norm of faith for a communion. And as soon as a religious movement crystallizes into an organization it is usually thought desirable to begin with the adoption of such a creed or confession.

Are any of the historical creeds fit bases for a reunited church? The Lambeth Conference of 1888 suggested the Nicene Creed. Many have suggested the Apostles' Creed. Others have suggested combinations or sections of these and other creeds.

Every creed is a definition and every definition is exclusive. It attempts to shut out alien elements, to differentiate its subject from similar or related things or subjects. And each one of the great historic creeds has been formulated with the object of excluding some particular theological tendency or tenet. They have not expressed the common convictions of the whole church but only those of a majority. Thus have they failed to be ecumenical and have actually been partisan. In one case the Nestorians have been excluded, in another the Arians. Majorities ruled, and at times that majority was obtained by methods which do not appear to be entirely justifiable in the light of historical research. If Christians need the soldiers of the emperor to help them decide the truth, then the creed does not express the

convictions of Christendom but the convictions of the emperor, who may be more interested in the political results than the religious truths.

And even when the majority might be right, yet a majority creed will not always express the convictions of a majority, but may be a compromise, the majority permitting a statement somewhat unsatisfactory to pass. Indeed, such a creed may fail to express accurately the convictions of a single person and still obtain a majority vote, each one convinced that it would be impossible for him alone to dominate the council sufficiently to satisfy himself. And in repeating such a statement the individual to be honest with himself must prefix the words with such a thought as this: "I am willing to subscribe to the following because of my desire for social worship and the welfare of the church, although it does not fully state my own personal convictions and I could wish the emphasis differently placed." We have the anomalous situation, therefore, that the creed which is designed to express the common convictions of the Christian world may fail to express the convictions of any, and at best is often only a combination of compromises permitted to pass by a majority.

Because the majority rules, no church creed can be changed until at least a majority demands it. A man will thus be pledged to a communion holding a certain creed as basal and yet be in decided opposition to the creed he recites. There are always more heretics within the church than are ever excluded. And the creed becomes a basis for disunion instead of union. It is a tolerated inheritance which, like many heirlooms, is kept

out of respect for our forbears rather than for any intrinsic value. It is far from the spontaneous expression of our common convictions.

In the fourth place, the creeds have never expressed the common convictions of all Christians because the councils formulating them have never truly been representative. The laity have never had any real opportunity to express themselves. The theologian, the teacher, the clergy, have taken the lead, controlled the program, and frequently have done all the voting. Those who have the most reason to be interested in maintaining divisions, because they have the positions of prominence and power, have made the definitions which have kept up these divisions, while those who paid the bills have been busy elsewhere. The laity can well call the clergy to repentance if schism is a sin. Without instructions from the clergy and careful indoctrination, our divisions could never persist.

Since the creeds have been partisan, majority actions, compromises between the clergy, and designed to exclude heretics, or at least to define heresy, or to distinguish a new denomination from those existing, it is natural that over-emphasis should be placed upon particular doctrines which are or were the particular points at issue. As a consequence we find the historical creeds unbalanced and incomplete. They define with great precision—even to a Greek diphthong—the authoritative doctrine of the natures of Christ, but leave vague and indefinite other doctrines, such as the atonement. We have been defining our differences rather than expressing our common convictions. No ecumenical

conference ever tried to formulate a statement which should express the common convictions of all Christians, which should compromise no one, and which should satisfactorily balance the different doctrines in their relative importance. Today we are tired of having our differences emphasized. Is a unanimous creed in which we all could join enthusiastically a human impossibility? If so, a united church is a chimera, for there will always be protestants and independents.

But not only are the historical creeds impossible as the basis for a reunited Christendom because they have not been ecumenical, they have never expressed the deepest religious convictions of men. These convictions are not intellectual, are not subject to exact statement, are not constant and unchanging, but are personal, vital, growing, fluctuating. No man can honestly promise never to change his mind. Convictions concerning the things of the spirit must vary with personal experiences. "When I was a child I thought as a child," but the growing man finds childish ideas too small. "The letter killeth, the spirit giveth life. The wind bloweth where it listeth and thou hearest the sound thereof but canst not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth, and so is every one that is born of the spirit." The things that are vital, which move men's hearts, which grip men's wills, are not subject to exact definition and unchanging form. The historical creeds have had an intellectual, philosophical interest rather than a moral, religious one. They have dealt with the convictions of the mind rather than with those of the heart.

The creeds have fixed faith upon historical conclusions rather than upon moral convictions. True faith does not look backward and become a pillar of salt, but, "forgetting the things that are behind," presses forward to the needs and promises of the future. Historical matters can be left to historical science to determine, not to majorities in a council. What we want is a statement, not of historical facts, but of eternal truth. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things unseen." It is a *willingness to act* on a proposition not yet proved. I have faith that the morning will come in a few hours and I set my alarm to waken me at daybreak. I cannot prove that it will come. It may never come for me. The hand of death may take me before that time, a comet break the regularity of the earth's rotation—but I have faith enough to wind the clock.

As an illustration of this difficulty let us take the doctrine of the virgin birth of our Lord. Volumes have been written on the matter. And yet this historically debated affirmation is made an integral part of the creeds, excluding from Christian fellowship and communion those who are not sufficiently satisfied with the evidence to make a dogmatic declaration concerning it. If Jesus never referred to it, nor any of his disciples, nor St. Paul, even where reference to it would seem to fit their thought,<sup>1</sup> cannot a man be a follower of Jesus without definitely committing himself? Are a man's conduct and character in any way dependent upon his decision at this point? Would a man who believes in the virgin birth be more inclined to treat

<sup>1</sup> Luke 4:22; John 7:28; II Tim. 2:8.

his wife lovingly than one who believes that the heavenly Father consecrated the natural processes he had put into the world to be the means of his supreme gift to men? Why should not the creeds declare upon matters of moral value?

Once more: the historical creeds naturally and unavoidably reflect the world-view (*Zeitgeist*) and the philosophical interests of the age in which they were formed. The meaning of words, the relations of ideas, are constantly changing under the influence of science and social contact. In five particulars the fundamental, philosophical, scientific background of the creeds makes them inadequate for our time and age as a basis for uniting all classes of thinking Christians.

First, the creeds presuppose a flat earth with heaven above and hell below. A modern man cannot honestly say, "He descended into hell, he ascended into heaven." There is no up or down in our universe. What we call up in the evening is down in the morning.

Secondly, the creeds presuppose a dualistic universe. Flesh is evil and absolutely incompatible with spirit. Human nature and divine nature are not extremes but utterly different essences. This dualism takes its supreme form in the doctrine of God and devil, each almighty in his own realm, although one is to be ultimately conquered.

Thirdly, the creeds presuppose a transcendental supernaturalism. God is an absentee monarch ruling through angels, ambassadors, and church officers. He has to have representatives on earth, he himself spending the time in the court of heaven. He created the world and left it, occasionally sending someone to

interfere in its physical and social affairs. But God is spirit and they that worship him must worship in spirit. In him we live and move and have our being. Closer is he than breathing, nearer than hands or feet.

Fourthly, the creeds presuppose a god who is an oriental monarch rather than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus. He is more interested in obtaining satisfaction, in upholding his majesty, in increasing his glory, than in making men better. He rules men rather than loves men. Without shedding of blood, animal or human or human-divine, he cannot forgive. The significance of the cross has been expressed in terms of a substitutionary, vicarious, willing sacrifice of the Son to appease the honor or justice of an almighty, transcendental King whose dignity will not allow him to forgive sinful but repentant men until someone has given satisfaction. It would seem that the Greek Zeus and the Roman Jupiter with his thunderbolts have had a larger influence in molding the thought of God as expressed in the creeds than he who numbers the very hairs of the head, whose eye is on the sparrow, who "so loved the world," who is to be trusted as a child can trust a loving father.

And then, finally, the great historical creeds are more interested in a philosophical, metaphysical definition of theories concerning Jesus than in a practical understanding of the message of Jesus. They argue *a priori* about his nature, essence, etc., but do not definitely refer to his teaching. That which seemed to be necessary to fit their metaphysical scheme, and can be expressed in the technique of contemporary philosophy,

is given the central place. It is not that I would make any less of Jesus but rather more, his own message, his own commanding personality, his own commands taking the place of second- or third-century metaphysics about him. It is the gospel *of* Jesus, not the gospel *about* him, or about the idealized risen one, which saves the world from selfishness and sin. "Not everyone that *saiith* unto *me*, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the Kingdom, but he that doeth the will of my Father." Jesus also told a parable of a man with two sons, one of whom was to be condemned because he made a confession which he did not try to carry out, and the other of whom was to be justified because, although refusing to make the confession that was expected, he did his father's will. Even the Apostles' Creed has but two phrases which can be said to express any prominent part of Jesus' message—the forgiveness of sins, and the life everlasting.

So again we come back to the great objection to the historical creeds as a basis of a reunited Christendom—they have left out the most important things. Men have recited all the creeds and yet believed in human slavery, black and white, in selling adulterated foods, in the human butchery called war, in all the injustice of much of our modern social, political, and economic life. We have treated of anise and cumin and left out the weightier matters of mercy, justice, love. We have dealt with incidental, philosophical shibboleths, with historical statements which are at the mercy of science, instead of expressing the great, eternal, never-changing, deeply human, divine principles which Jesus preached and lived. What creed makes a clear

statement of the love of God as a Father pitying his children? Where does a creed declare the brotherhood of man, the basis of human life, the great commandment of service, the demand for mutual forgiveness and helpfulness?

If, then, we are to have a reunited church and if it is to have a creedal basis other than each individual's expression of his own thoughts, that confession must be the common expression of our common convictions, designed not to exclude but to include all who call themselves Christian, and flexible enough so that no one will ever compromise himself in its recital. It must recognize the growth of Christian experience and thought, with its face forward, not backward. It must be independent of any conclusions which historical or physical science may reach. It must be free from any world-view, philosophy, or metaphysics which may change through the ages, yet be adaptable to every one. And it must deal with the content of Jesus' message, finding in him the criteria of interpretation and the relative emphasis to be placed upon each doctrine.

Have we common convictions which can be expressed which will meet these conditions? We cannot begin by excluding the convictions of Unitarians or independents or Modernists, but to be truly ecumenical we must allow anyone who wants to call himself Christian to take his part and contribute his share, both positive and negative. It is certain that we cannot agree upon any one philosophic basis, nor depend upon the common acceptance of the so-called conclusions of modern science. It is probably just as impossible for us to agree upon any method of biblical interpretation or

ecclesiastical form of organization or ritual, even the simplest. It must not be stated in phrases or terms which have been the subject of disagreement in the past and it must be in terms which are not only within the understanding of the common people but are also their natural means of expression. We must not seek to offset doctrine with doctrine as a bait to this or that communion, or appear to be deliberately avoiding vital issues which are known sources of controversy. It must express the moral earnestness and the social impulses which have dominated the "movements" that have so stirred the laity in recent years. It must be of the people, by the people, for the people. It must breathe the passion of the prophets rather than the pedantry of philosophers. It will be utterly different from what we have been accustomed to, yet it will find a response in our individual lives which will convince us of its vitality, validity, virility.

I believe that we can have such a statement, and I want to offer a suggestive wording for it. For this I advance no claims *a priori*. It may fail before the tribunal of the requirements I myself have already laid down. It is not expected to be final even with the author. Before this article is in print I might decide upon changes. It is simply offered in hope that it may be suggestive of the method by which the desired end may be accomplished. If it produces any genuine sympathetic discussion it will have accomplished its end.

#### **A Suggestive Statement of the Common Convictions of Christendom**

I believe in Jesus as the one who best reveals to mankind, in his words and in

his life, both the nature and the will of God.

I believe he reveals God as the Father of all mankind, the giver of every good and perfect gift, the source of every noble thought and purpose, and the moral explanation of the universe.

I believe that he reveals God's will toward men to be, that all men, everywhere, should be brothers seeking to serve one another in love, till we all attain unto the fulness of the stature of the manhood of Jesus, our elder brother, being perfect spiritually, socially, physically, and that none should fail of the highest possible development.

I believe in the Kingdom of God as the organized expression of this universal moral brotherhood and the culmination of the progress of the gospel, with the final supremacy and immortality of the spiritual life.

It is only necessary to say further that this statement can probably be enlarged without difficulty. There are certainly other convictions, which are positively Christian, which are common to us all. Modernist and reactionary, liberal and conservative, Holy-Jumper and Quaker, Unitarian and Romanist, Christian Scientist and Adventist, can find their moral-religious convictions here expressed.

Of course you can believe more than the creed states. Whoever found any creedal statement, even in his own communion, which stated with absolute completeness everything he believes on religious subjects? The creed begins with the words "I believe," but does not add "this and nothing more." And what we are seeking is not a composite of possible

beliefs but an actual statement of vital ecumenical convictions. For anyone to seek herein his own pet theological hobbies, or the heirlooms of ecclesiasticism, will destroy the very purpose of it. Let him ask rather these questions: Are these distinctively Christian convictions? Are they common to all Christians? Are they vital and primary? It is the attack upon non-Christian, atheistic, and agnostic strongholds which reveals the "first principles" of our common religion.<sup>1</sup> Belief in these things will make human slavery, war, and social injustice impossible. The moral program

of Christianity and the moral grandeur of the character of its Founder become a vital part of its platform. And the possibility of any union upon any such basis will depend upon how fully these fundamental moral principles have really gripped us, so that we shall be willing to accommodate our extra beliefs and subordinate them to the central ideals. We will then be first of all Christians, and secondarily and incidentally only mystics, ritualists, pietists, sacramentalists. Our platform will not tie us to the past but impel us toward the future with the program of Jesus our compelling purpose.

<sup>1</sup> Arthur J. Brown has made a splendid contribution at this point in his recent book, *Unity and Missions*, chap. viii, under the heading "The Accepted Essentials of Christianity."